

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - A Pragmatic Analysis Of Critique And Evaluation



Abstract: It is generally accepted that a critique (or criticism) gives a more articulated account of the strengths and weaknesses of an argument than an evaluation. It will be argued in this paper that the difference between a critique and an evaluation is not one of depth, but of scope of analysis. An evaluation is concerned with the value of an argument relatively to a set of domain-dependent criteria, whereas a critique is mainly concerned with the claim of that argument with regard to the reality it is about.

1. Introduction

Critique (or criticism) and evaluation are close concepts that have been compared in argument studies (Johnson, 2000) as two means of argument appraisal. Johnson (2000) claims that a critique gives a more articulated account of the strengths and weaknesses of an argument (or a product, to be general) than an evaluation. The aim of this paper is to show that the difference between a critique and an evaluation is not one of depth, but of scope of analysis. We argue that an evaluation basically consists of the appreciation of a product relatively to its domain, whereas a critique is mainly concerned with the opinion or position underlying the product.

First, we look at the context of use of the two terms (Section 2), then, we make a distinction between the two concepts in terms of objective and approach (Section 3). We distinguish them as two different types of discourse (Section 4), and finally, we discuss the dialectical nature of critique (Sections 5).

2. Meaning distinction

In English, the concepts of 'critique' and 'criticism' are often confounded, despite the negative connotation of the latter. We will use the term critique here to refer to an intellectually serious criticism that 'evaluates on the basis of an interpretation' - this is criticism which judges, but which, at the same time, explains and justifies its judgement (Nowlan, 2001). Moreover, our choice of the

term critique is motivated by the fact that a critique, contrary to criticism, can not apply to individuals.

In argument studies, the concept of critique (called criticism) has been opposed to that of evaluation, both being related to argument appraisal. Yet, contrary to critique, the use of the term evaluation is not limited to the realm of argumentation. One can evaluate a person, an object or a situation, etc. in order to decide whether it has certain properties or whether it satisfies certain criteria. For example, one can evaluate the robustness of a system, the performance of an athlete, etc. Any phenomenon or product can be evaluated if there are criteria that allow it to be 'measured'. Freeman (2000) shows that evaluative statements may have a number of uses, including expressing approval or disapproval of something as a means to some end, asserting that some person or thing satisfies or fails to satisfy certain normative criteria, or judging the merits of some policy. The object of a critique, on the other hand, can only be the product of a reasoning. Critiquing a product necessarily implies that the structure behind it is traced back to a purposeful opinion or belief. Moreover, a critique can only be addressed to an opinion that seeks the commitment of an audience. One would not critique something that is not a 'purposive act of communication' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992). As a matter of fact, contrary to an evaluation, a critique can only be directed at an argument.

3. Critique and evaluation: two different approaches to argument analysis

Restating the criticism and evaluation distinction made in Johnson's *Manifest Rationality* (2000), Govier (2000) writes:

'We evaluate, say, a movie, if we pronounce it good or bad - and when we do so, we presumably have some standards in mind. But to evaluate a movie is not yet to criticize it. To criticize it, we have to articulate our standards, show evidence as to why the movie did or did not meet them, and put our comments into some kind of coherent perspective. To evaluate something is to pronounce it good, bad, or indifferent - or somewhere along the spectrum. To criticize it is to develop an account of its strengths and weaknesses, an account that shows some discrimination between more and less significant strengths or weaknesses and can give assistance as to how the product might be improved.'

According to this view, a critique is the articulated and analytical version of an evaluation. Our claim is that the difference between an evaluation and a critique is not essentially one of depth of analysis, as stated above, although analysis is the

major requirement for critiquing. In fact, it is the burden of the critique to develop a full account of the argument because it is aimed at something more 'sensitive' than the quality of the product as such, and that is the opinion or more generally the position of the arguer.

To explain this, we have to first emphasize the role of argument as the mould of an opinion. From the perspective of a theory of communication, the object of argumentation is the transformation of an opinion into an argument with respect to a particular audience (Breton, 2001). We think that any opinion as expressed by any single argument can be considered as an instance of a more general position. By *position*, we refer to the proponent's global stance with regard to the subject of his argumentation. It is the set of ideas regarding a subject that situates a person relatively to others. Also, generally, to determine someone's position, one needs to consider his history of argumentation.

Our view is that to critique a product, one has to do much more than develop an account of its strengths and weaknesses. A critique must be able to determine what exactly is the message of the product and what is it that the proponent is trying to make the audience accept, believe or share with him? Beyond the product, a critique must be able to identify the opinion, or better, the position of the arguer with regard to the subject of his argumentation.

It is precisely this inferential leap to the opinion or position of the proponent of the argument that distinguishes a critique from an evaluation. Critiquing is the only means by which one can question the opinions, beliefs, representations, and values that are conveyed by an argument. It is also the mechanism by which one can reveal, for a given audience, the goals that a particular argument tries to achieve.

An evaluation, on the other hand, needs to go no further than assess the strengths and weaknesses of a product. This is done relatively to the norms and standards that prevail within the domain to which the product belongs. A critique can also contain evaluation, but it also needs to deconstruct the argumentative structure of the product.

4. Argumentative versus evaluative discourse

From a critiquing perspective, argument appraisal means identifying the position of the proponent with regard to his subject matter, and justifying this understanding by using the proponent's current or past arguments as supporting evidence. It is because of this need for justification, that a critique appears more

analytical comparatively to an evaluation.

Just like a critical discussion whose stages must be correctly executed so that it can develop in a satisfactory fashion (Rees, 2001), a critique, as a normative type of discourse, must meet certain requirements. The most important constraint for a critic is to identify the proponent's position. It is based on this premise, that he develops his own argumentation. Driven by his agreement or disagreement with that position, the critic attempts to convince the audience or the other party of his interpretation. The elements that can support this interpretation must be found in the proponent's arguments, hence the critique's thorough and preliminary analysis of them. Thus, the 'articulated account' is in fact an account of all those elements that warrant the assumptions of the critic regarding the proponent's position.

Our point is that the analytical flavour of critique is in fact a burden of the critiquing attitude and the fact that a critique is itself an argument. While an evaluation constitutes a distinct type of discourse - evaluative discourse - a critique is a certain type of argumentative discourse. A critique is the product of a sequence of reasoning where one moves from assumptions about the other party's position and goals to certain conclusions by means of warrants.

5. The dialectical character of critiquing

Johnson (2000) also claims that a critique, in contrast to an evaluation, performs its assessment with the purpose of enhancing the product. He writes:

'Criticism goes beyond evaluation in that it must take into account the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the product and is intended for the one who produced the argument as a vehicle whereby the argument may be improved. Thus, it may be said that criticism is part of a dialectical process, whereas evaluation is not.' (p. 219)

Neither a critique nor an evaluation has for objective to enhance a product. Ultimately, the purpose of an evaluation is to decide upon the quality of a product and take some action. The purpose of a critique is to counter or to enforce the goals of an argument. Only upon approval of those goals, the critique will contribute to their achievement. When in disagreement with the proponent's viewpoint, then the critique will precisely intend to avoid the accomplishment of those goals.

However, given that a critique considers the relationship between the position and the argument, it can positively contribute to the product in many ways, for

example, by proposing a better way of articulating a position, by improving the understanding of the problem, by providing domain knowledge, by presenting different viewpoints, etc. Yet, for this to happen, the two parties (the protagonist and the antagonist) must engage in a dialogue. It is the mutual exchange of viewpoints that results in the improvement of the product and not critiquing by itself. Also, if critical discussions and critical thinking are said to promote such positive outcomes, it is because they are based on a dialogue paradigm, whether that dialogue takes place between two distinct individuals or is a 'mini-debate carried on with oneself' (Rieke and Sillars, 1997).

When provided a posteriori, a critique simply enables the interpretation of a product by determining the standpoint of its proponent and thereby revealing its argumentative structure. Nevertheless, critiquing requires dialectical reasoning since it operates on an input provided by another reasoner (Walton, 1990), and like any argument, it aims at securing acceptance of a claim (Hitchcock, 2002) and cannot do so irrespective of the values, opinions and beliefs of the individuals to whom it is addressed.

The role of a critique is to control the effects that an argument/product aims to produce on its audience. Contrary to an evaluation which verifies if and how the goals of an argument are achieved (by assessing it against a set of criteria), a critique is concerned with whether, given the position of the proponent, those goals deserve to be achieved. By critiquing, individuals validate their understanding of a position and, depending on the case, attempt to facilitate or resist its effects.

6. *Conclusion*

To conclude these remarks, we can say that basically, a critique and an evaluation differ relatively to two related points. One is their purpose and therefore their scope of analysis: an evaluation assesses a product by establishing its value with regard to a set of criteria with the purpose of acting upon it. A critique identifies and judges the position the product supports with the purpose of containing or amplifying its effects. The other aspect is related to their discursive attitude: an evaluative discourse appraises its object within a well-established domain-dependent frame of reference, which requires no justification. A critique, as an instance of argumentative discourse, moves from a set of assumptions (regarding the position of the proponent) to a conclusion, a move that it needs to warrant by justificatory elements.

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